



"Here it comes," Virgil whispered under his breath, turning away from the approaching policeman.

Joanie shoved hands in pockets and replied, also in a whisper, "Be cool." Then, to the Nora, "Keep digging."

"Hello," the policeman said, talking loud as he was still twenty yards away, moving with purposeful strides across the green grass of Tranquility Park. "I'll have to ask you to stop that digging."

Virgil, in a navy blue suit, took a breath and squared his shoulders towards the Policeman. He attempted a smile and stuck out his hand. "Hello officer. What seems to be the problem?"

Behind him Joanie and Nora, both wearing work clothes - jeans, boots, reflective safety vests over cotton and hard hats - paused to watch. They were standing around a plaque set into the ground that read: *"City of Houston Time Capsule. Buried September 2nd, 1960. Not to be opened until September 2nd, 2015."*

"Can I see your work permit?" the cop asked, ignoring Virgil's hand.

Virgil looked around, confused and stammered, "...permit...? Why... what...?"

"Yeah, yeah," Joanie said. "I got it over here." She retrieved a metal clipboard, opened it, and flipped through a stack of paper.

"I can call the Mayor's office?" Virgil offered.

"No, no," Joanie replied. "I'm sure I have a copy."

"So do I dig or what?" Nora said.

"No," the cop said.

"Yes," Joanie said at the same time.

Nora speared the blade of the shovel in the ground and leaned on the handle. A big girl, crowding six feet tall and past the two century mark, her top-weight pushed it down a good six inches. She winked at the cop. "I'm listening to the man with the gun."

For all her heft, Nora had a very pretty face. Long, wavy curls of hair escaped from her hardhat and she made a show of tucking them back in. "Hell, even if he didn't have the gun," she continued, "he's too cute to argue with."

The cop - a youthful black who enjoyed visiting the gym, radiated confidence, and kept his appearance sharp and professional - did a double take. When she caught his eye, Nora winked again and there it was - that moment a man, confronted with such an unlikely specimen, thought, *what if...?*

"Here," Joanie snapped up a piece of paper. "Found it."

She handed it to Virgil who passed it to the cop.

The cop looked at its face. It appeared official enough, with stamps and signatures, but he didn't know enough about it to say one way or the other. "I'll have to call this in," he decided.

"For Christsake," Joanie bitched.

"Hey now," Nora beamed. "Overtime!"

"Look," Virgil said, "Just call the Mayor's office. You know Jack Vance, right? Ask for him."

"All I know is this thing isn't supposed to be dug up until tomorrow," the cop said. "There's supposed to be press; even a van. Buses of kids and all that. You guys are making a mistake."

Virgil nodded his head and chuckled, "Yes, you're right, officer....?"

"Martin."

"Officer Martin. See, the thing is, well.... Did you hear what happened when they opened the League City time capsule two years ago? No? It was somewhat of a disaster. Fifty years ago they didn't appreciate what the groundwater around here could do to even the sturdiest box made during that time. Anyway it was a stinking mess. The only things that survived were bits and pieces of old junk that couldn't be corroded. They pulled something out that looked - I swear to God - just like a wooden dildo. Might have been part of something else when it had been buried, but when they slapped it in the Mayor's hand.... Well, most people snickered, but quite a few were very offended. All those kids asking '*what's that, mommy?*'.

"Oh! And there was the frog, too. Well, the frog skeleton, dressed in an adorable tuxedo - complete with a top-hat and cane, hermetically sealed in a bag with the sheet music to *Ragtime Gal*-"

"-Can we get on with this?" Joanie interrupted. "No way this project is authorized for golden time."

Virgil touched Officer Martin's arm, gently turning him away. "Our Mayor does not want that happening here. So this is somewhat of a preemptive strike. If we find everything in order, the capsule goes back and we cover it up just like it was. Bada bing. If, however, it's a big smelly puddle of slop? Well, I've got some clean old junk in my car. You understand how this works? Have to make hizhonor look good for the cameras."

Officer Martin's eyes went from the unctuous Virgil, to the exasperated Joanie, landing on the bemused Nora. "Okay," he said. "Carry on."

"Thank you Officer," Virgil said, once again attempting to smile.

"Hey Officer Martin," Nora called out. "You want to help dig? I'll bet those big arms of yours could make short work of this hole."

Officer Martin fought back a grin. "Tell you what, lady. I'll swing by here after I get off work and see if still need help with your hole."

Nora barked out a laugh loud enough to be heard in Sugar Land. "When's your shift end?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Me and my hole will be waiting."

Officer Martin strutted away using everything his momma gave him.

When the policeman was out of earshot, Joanie cut her eyes from Virgil to Nora and back again. "Jesus, you two...."

"I have bad news," Richard Hautala told Joanie. As if to emphasize the words, he dragged a straight razor across his hairy and bespotted forearm. A thin line of blood welled up from the cut.

"Um," Joanie said.

"Oh, this?" Hautala held up the razor. "This is just for effect." He turned it around and showed Joanie the other side where a tube containing red-dyed Vaseline lay across the blade. "It ain't real. It's about as sharp as an asshole. You squeeze this here for the blood." He demonstrated, dragging it across his wrist this time - same result: a thin line of red.

"Okay."

"But why, you're wondering?"

"Hey, Mr. Hautala, really-"

"-Surely you noticed my new look?" Old Man Hautala smiled - dentures gleaming - and twisted his head to let Joanie take it all in. An octogenarian, Mr. Hautala was bald and shriveled with the body shape - and skin texture - of an avocado. But since Joanie had last seen him, he'd added eyebrow studs, ear stretchings, and facial tattoos -

tears at the corner of his eyes. He had a stud on one nostril and a loop through his lower lip.

He winked and lifted his polo shirt. Both sagging, leathery nipples had been pierced; connected by a silver chain.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"That's.... Something," Joanie rubbed the back of her neck. "You said bad news?"

"Kids today," Mr. Hautala explained, tucking his shirt back in, "do this shit now. If I want their business, I have to show them I relate." He gingerly brought a finger up to touch one of the ear stretchers.

Joanie flinched when the whole ear fell off, hitting the ground with a clang.

"Oops," Mr. Hautala reached to pick it up. Like the razor, it was a fake. His real ear was still where it belonged, on the side of his head. It had liver spots and tufts of hair, but no holes.

"I don't mind telling you," he said, fitting the prosthetic and screwing it in place, "it's all fake. Even the tattoos. Why take a needle when Sharpies cost, like, a dollar?"

Joanie shrugged.

"Right?"

"You said bad news?" Joanie prodded.

"These couple of kids come in looking to trade on old tech. On chips? Yeah, right, I tell them I'll do what I can, but don't go buying that house in the subs just yet. Anyway, these kids look like... like... the colour out of space, you know? Barely human. The dude had horns. No shit, implanted little nubs on his forehead, supposed to be horns. Huh. The girl's pants were so tight, you could tell what she drank for... Nevermind. Anyway, when they come back and I tell them the deal, she starts slicing up her arm. I'm hip. Bad news hurts. Give me a whetstone, a Gillette, a squirting

flower and five minutes and we'll commiserate together, darlin'. So here I am. What do you think?"

"Desperate times," Joanie stated.

"Too right!" Mr. Hautala exclaimed.

"The bad news?" Joanie tried again.

"Yeah. Turns out the buyer is in a sanitarium so.... No money."

Joanie rubbed a hand over her face.

"Okay, so this is not to say there will never be money, but just now...? She's kind of tied up."

Houston, September 2nd, 1960.

Ten year old Marion Bradley stood in wide-eyed wonder as the celebrity worked his way through the crowd. He tossed his head back and showed teeth when he laughed and, when he shook hands with the city's politicians, his head tilted slightly and his eyebrows raised inquisitively at their names. Houston doesn't have a fall season, so it was hot, but even still the celebrity wore a tapered jacket with a fleece collar. His waist was encircled by a gun-belt; the holster of which bore the image of a chess piece. He said "Thank you," with a peculiar clip to the words.

His name was Richard Boone and he was there on a publicity junket and to watch the time-capsule buried.

To young Marion, however, his name was Paladin and he was just about the closest thing to a living god she'd ever seen. Once a week she saw him on the television being as brave and intractable, wise and lusty as the entire pantheon of Greek deities; so how could he be here, now, walking around with them just as if he were a real person?

She was positively transfixed.

As he moved among the people, his eyes fell on her and he smiled. "Ho ho!" he said, scooping her off her feet. "What do we have here?"

Under his hands, Marion's flower dress became wings and she flew in the sky. If he let go, she'd fall into the sun. He didn't let go, however, just spun her around in a circle then set her back down. "You are just about the cutest thing I have ever seen. I believe I'm going to ask your father if you can join me for dinner tonight at the Carlton Hotel?"

Standing next to them, beaming like a child himself, her dad said, "Maybe when she's older."

"It's a date," Paladin said, slipping her a card with a wink. He gave one to her father, too. In fact, he handed them out freely to all around.

As they were closing the lid on the time capsule, he used two fingers to expertly flick one of those cards into the box. People cheered as it spun through the narrow opening at just the last moment possible.

The cards all bore the image of that same chess piece from the holster. They read "Have Gun, Will Travel".

Marion Bradley held the card in both hands like an icon. She knew it was a treasure she would never lose.

"Of course she lost it - or threw it away." Mr. Hautala had bagged up the card they'd retrieved from the time capsule. He slid it across the table to Joanie. "This was supposed to be the replacement. Shame. She was going to pay over a two hundred grand for it too."

Joanie, hands folded on her lap, looked at the card. It was remarkably well preserved.

"What's it worth, really?" she asked.

"Less than nothing," he replied. "Well, check that. Because of the press you're getting, I could maybe get a couple thou. Maybe. It isn't every day you can snag grip from a stolen time capsule. The weirdness factor alone might go five grand." Mr. Hautala shrugged.

"Well, the buyer still wants it, though, right?"

"Sure. But, like I said, they locked her up."

"When's she getting out?"

"Eh, this could be one of those *if* she's getting out situations." Mr. Hautala rubbed his thumb against two fingers, making the international gesture of money. "She's very wealthy and her family is worried about their inheritance."

"Doesn't seem like a reason to lock her up." Joanie crossed her arms. "Isn't she fighting it?"

"Absolutely. She's a big shot lawyer, you know. It's just that, well, she has gone a little crazy." He tapped the card. "Two hundred grand plus for this? Do you know how many of these cards are out there? Even supposedly authentic ones - printed by the studio in the 50s and 60s - can be had for around fifty bucks. Hell, you can get one signed by Richard Boone himself for a thou or less. Nope. She has to have this one; no matter what the cost." Mr. Hautala whistled low and circled a finger around his ear.

"She's a collector," Joanie said, sounding indignant. "Lots of people pay lots more for stupider stuff."

"Sure," Mr. Hautala agreed. "But Marion Bradley isn't a collector. She is trying to recreate her life to be exactly like it was when she was a girl back in the '60s. Bought her parents' old house; got a refurbished Chevy Covair; snatched up every toy from that era. Changed her wardrobe. She's been sinking millions of dollars into this obsession. The doctors call it *crippling nostalgia*."

"They just made that up."

"She showed up in court wearing pedal pushers and a denim blouse knotted under her breasts. Her hair in ponytails, sucking a lollipop. She weighs close to two hundred pounds."

Mr. Hautala lifted the duffel-bag containing the rest of the stuff Joanie and her crew stole from the time capsule and handed it over. "Me? I don't get it," he said. "I never did look forward to looking back. Of course, that's probably because things were so terrible when I was a kid. Wars with a capital W. Diseases and no medicine. Hunger. And the constant fear of death from above 'cause all those damned pterodactyls."

"Is anything in here worth... anything?" Joanie said, lifting the bag.

Mr. Hautala made a face. "I took pictures and notes. Like I said, I'll shop it around. Y'all got a trending news story with that time capsule burglary, so there may be some interest there. But beyond nostalgia or weirdness?" He shook his head.

Dejected, Joanie stood to leave.

"Hey kid," Mr. Hautala stopped her at the door. "Just in case you're interested - the sanitarium where they're keeping Marion Bradley is located over on the Southwest side. In Missouri City. A place called Sendak's. Not like she's locked up in Supermax or anything."

Joanie paused with her hand on the doorknob. She blinked twice.

"She'd be grateful, I'm sure," Mr. Hautala continued, "for a visit."

Joanie nodded slowly.

"Hey, check this out!" Mr. Hautala raised the fake razor to his mouth. "You think this'll freak those kids next time I see them?" He opened his mouth wide, eyes popping, and dragged the dull blade all over his tongue.

He also squirted some of the fake blood.

"Pah!" he winced, spitting. "Yuk!"

Joanie left him, closing the door on a sputtering of "Puh!"'s

"Oh shit," Virgil said, his eyes growing wide. "Ohshitohshitohshit,"

They were sitting in the booth of a Mexican restaurant close to the airport with the time capsule items spread out over the table, taking inventory. Virgil's outburst had been caused by the door opening. Joanie looked over her shoulder to see Detective Donald Sobol walking in.

"Be cool," she grabbed Virgil's wrist just as he was about to start scooping all the stolen items into the bag. "Be cool."

She let go the wrist. Virgil folded his hands.

Momentarily, Detective Sobol stood at the edge of their table. "Well hello, Ms. Muncie," he said. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Detective," Joanie muttered by way of greeting.

Detective Sobol set his hands on the table and hunched over the various maps, papers, trinkets, toys and doo-dads. He smiled. His aquamarine eyes sparkled. He laughed, showing them the two rows of coffee and cigarette stained teeth. "You've got to be kidding me."

"What?" Joanie said.

"Oh, nothing." He stood up. Then pushed his hands on his lower back and stretched. "Hey, maybe you can help me out with something. There was this unusual robbery yesterday, maybe you heard? A crew of slick operators stole a time capsule just before it was supposed to be dug up. Really embarrassed the Mayor in front of all

those news cameras; standing over an empty hole with a bunch of nothing. But you wouldn't know anything about that?"

"What's a time capsule?" Joanie asked.

"Right." The detective said. "Y'all ought to be more careful. Food here's good, but they don't really clean the tables very well. Might get all this stuff sticky."

"Oh, right!" Virgil exclaimed. He started shoveling the stolen goods away immediately. "Thanks for the advice."

Detective Sobol watched Virgil, shaking his head sadly. Then he turned his attention to Joanie. "When are you going to stop this?" he asked.

Joanie cocked her head and just looked at him with a dull, blank expression.

"Can't you see it's over?" the Detective continued. "The time for this type of nonsense has come and gone. There's no more room for the common crook in today's society. You either have to be a brutal, remorseless killer or a highly sophisticated criminal to get noticed. These little gifts of yours? I hate to tell you this, but they're passé."

Virgil used both hands to cram the items in the bag. He struggled with the zipper, catching it on the edge of an old map. When he forced it, the paper ripped. "Shit," he said, holding up a ruined piece of history.

Detective Sobol motioned towards Virgil with an open hand. "See? This is who you're working with now? What ever happened to Leonard? Stark and Westlake?"

"Hey, those two...." Joanie sat forward, getting upset.

"Yeah, I know," Sobol interrupted. "But then there's Connell and Matheson, too. Hell, even Bradbury left you."

Joanie brought a fist down. Her mouth became a tense, white line and her eyes narrowed. Sobol recognized he'd gone too far. His voice softened. "I'm just saying.

You're time has passed."

A waiter came with a basket of chips and two bowls of salsa. Detective Sobol took advantage of the interruption.

"Anyway, I'll leave you to your meal." He set twenty dollars on their table. "On me."

"Whoa, hey," Virgil pushed the money away like it was on fire. His distrust for police ran deep. "No need for that."

Detective Sobol put a hand on Virgil's shoulder and squeezed. He used the other hand to tuck the money into the breast pocket of Virgil's shirt. "I insist," he said. "I voted for Chris Bell."